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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended to stimulate debate about the need for national policies of early childhood education in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) by arguing that each country should have a set of policies that give early childhood education the importance it deserves as an arena for promoting human and social development. The paper reviews research conducted in the United States, the LAC region, and other countries indicating that high quality preschool programs can benefit children by improving their nutrition, helping them develop basic cognitive skills, and inculcating in them at an early age intellectual curiosity and the desire to learn. The paper recommends that, because the key constraint to establishing successful preschool programs in the LAC region is the lack of financial resources, LAC countries should develop methods to attract private sector participation to achieve the goal of providing high-quality preschool programs for all children who need them. It suggests that governments might also develop partnerships with other non-governmental organizations and local communities to provide quality care for poor children. (MDM)

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Towards a Policy for Early Childhood Education in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Harvard Institute for International Development

1992

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Introduction

This paper aims to stimulate debate about the need for national policies of early childhood education in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Although initiatives to promote the well-being of children should look beyond the educational sphere to the promotion of health and community development as well, the focus of this paper is on the *education* potential of such programs, and the audience is assumed to be primarily concerned with education issues.

As of 1987, only 15 percent of children under age six in the LAC region were enrolled in preschool programs, a quarter of these children in private institutions. These low figures indicate that early childhood education has not received priority in public policy. The strong influences of early experience on child development and the rising participation of women in the labor force in the region suggest the need for countries to have policies conducive to improving the quality of care available to children. This paper does not propose specific policies as those are likely to vary from one country to another. Rather, the principal argument is that each country should have a set of policies that give early childhood education the importance it deserves as an arena for promoting human and social development. The lack of national policies on this subject partly explains the multiplicity of agencies that operate in the field and the lack of coordination among these efforts.

This paper reviews some of the studies that document the effects of preschool education. These studies suggest that preschool education has the potential to produce modest gains in student achievement and to increase the likelihood that students will be promoted to the next grade. Given the high rates of repetition in schools in the LAC region, initiatives that could reduce this source of internal inefficiency have special interest. In addition, U.S. studies have found that high-quality preschool programs produce effects that extend well into adult life.

All countries in the region have carried out a range of programs in preschool education. Sufficient accumulated experience exists to guide broader initiatives and to form the base for careful and systematic evaluation. Research in this field should identify the level of quality necessary for a preschool program to have significant impacts, how the benefits compare to the costs of such quality programs, and the type of program most beneficial to poor children. The literature also suggests the need to develop initiatives that will serve large numbers of children and emphasize their overall development rather than simply their custody.

As countries of the LAC region design early childhood education policies, resource constraints will play a dominant role in determining what is feasible. Clearly, expansion of preschool education should not be made at the expense of primary education. On the contrary, preschool education expansion should go hand in hand with reforms in traditional primary curricula to make them more developmentally appropriate and to incorporate the development of social skills along with cognitive abilities. LAC countries must develop methods to attract private sector participation to achieve the goal of providing high-quality preschool programs to all children who need them.

The Need for Early Childhood Education in Latin America and the Caribbean

This section examines the need for expanded early childhood education services in Latin America and the Caribbean. This need is based on the low level of coverage by existing services, exacerbated by the growing participation of women in the labor force and the potential contribution of preschool education to the internal efficiency of primary education.

Coverage of Preschool Education

Table 1 shows the relatively low level of access to pre-primary education in the LAC region. Only Chile, Suriname, and Cuba have more than 80 percent of the five-year-old children enrolled in preschool. Thirteen countries have less than half of the children enrolled in this level. Overall, however, enrollment levels have been increasing rapidly during the last ten years.

The "Age" column in Table 1 indicates the age group of the population that can be enrolled in institutions at this level. Gross enrollment ratios are the number of children enrolled in preschool as a percent of the total population that is eligible to enroll at this level. Because there may be some disparities between the "official" age of preschool education and the actual ages of the children enrolled (some may be older and some younger), these figures probably overestimate the proportion of the "official age group" enrolled in that level.

Although the number of children covered by these programs has increased substantially in the last decade, most children still do not participate in such programs. In 1987, only 15 percent of the almost 64 million children up to age six participated in any preschool programs (see Table 2), an increase from 8.3 percent in 1980. In addition, there is wide diversity among countries in the percentage of this age group served, and in the reliance on private preschools. In 1987, about 25 percent of the enrollments were in private institutions, down from 30 percent in 1980.

Since the 1970s, LAC countries have gained substantial experience in developing different programs of early childhood education, although the scale of such programs is very small relative to the population of eligible children. These programs aim at a broad range of goals and strategies. For instance, several programs involve extensive community participation and attempt to address more than the cognitive needs of children. In general, there has been little evaluation of these programs.

Table 1. Access to pre-primary education in the LAC region. Gross enrollment ratios, 1980 and 1988, ranked by gross enrollment in 1988.

Country	Age	Pre-Primary Gross Enrollment Ratios 1980	1988
Barbados	3-4	41	n.a.
Trinidad and Tobago	3-4	3	5
Nicaragua	3-6	8	15
El Salvador	4-6	11	16
Dominican Republic	3-6	4	18
Ecuador	4-5	10	18
Guatemala	4-6	14	19
Honduras	5-6	13	20
Peru	3-5	15	21
Paraguay	6-6	15	27
Uruguay	2-5	19	28
Brazil	4-6	14	32
Bolivia	4-5	26	36
Colombia	5-5	27	37
Guyana	4-5	60	51
Venezuela	4-5	50	54
Costa Rica	5-5	39	58
Panama	5-5	33	59
Argentina	4-5	40	61
Mexico	4-5	24	61
Jamaica	3-5	70	75
Chile	5-5	71	83
Suriname	4-5	n.a.	85
Cuba	5-5	62	99

Source: Unesco 1991.
Note: Countries for which no information is available do not appear in this table.

Table 2. Total number and percentage of children under six years of age receiving formal preschool education, and percentage in private institutions, 1987.

	Total	% in Preschool	% in Private Preschool
South America			
Argentina	766,138	20	31
Bolivia	144,574	11	7
Brazil	2,907,290	13	37
Colombia	296,190	7	55
Chile	286,491	17	36
Ecuador	96,128	5	38
Paraguay	21,942	3	
Peru	707,334	19	14
Uruguay	55,524	17	26
Venezuela	549,376	18	16
Central America			
Costa Rica	66,365	15	18
El Salvador	68,516	7	38
Guatemala	80,785	5	44
Honduras	51,740	5	17
Nicaragua	76,635	10	26
Panama	26,553	8	28
Cuba	230,848	23	0
Haiti	33,500	4	72
Mexico	2,625,678	21	7
Dominican Republic	101,257	9	78
English Speaking			
Antigua	1,543		
Aruba	1,888	30	92
Dominica	2,627	32	100
Grenada	3,498	28	0
Guyana	25,316	21	
Virgin Islands	226		
Jamaica	131,751	40	84
Montserrat	512	50	
St. Christopher	1,635	30	72
St. Lucia	4,175	15	
Suriname	17,140	35	45
Trinidad	2,015		
Total	9,399,621	15	25

Source: UNESCO-OREALC 1990, Cuadro 7.
Note: Countries for which no information is available do not appear in this table.

> *Although interest has grown, and experiments have proliferated, few systematic evaluations of these experiments exist and we do not yet have a good idea of which intervention strategies work best when and for whom. We know even less about long term impacts. Even without evaluation it is clear that there is no magic formula. It is clear that programs, in addition to covering only a small portion of the preschool population, are generally of low quality, and usually cost much more than most governments can afford.* (Myers 1983,128)

Most LAC countries feature an array of programs of early intervention; only rarely does the ministry of education have a national policy or curriculum to guide or integrate these efforts. In many cases the ambiguity regarding the purposes of early childhood education results in parallel sets of interventions: preschool efforts run by the ministry of education, childcare centers run by the office of the President's spouse, and interventions from non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Participation of Women in the Labor Force

In the LAC region, the number of women working in paid jobs increased from 16 million in 1965 to almost 40 million in 1988, an increase of 240 percent (see Table 3). As a percentage of the paid workforce, women accounted for 20 percent in 1965, 24 percent in 1975, and 27 percent in 1988.

This increase is beneficial for society in several ways. Paid work expands women's opportunities to achieve equal dignity and decision-making power within the family and allows them social interaction outside of the family. In addition, a woman's participation in the labor force expands opportunities for the whole family by increasing its living standards. Finally, the increase in women in the workforce expands the opportunities for national economic productivity by broadening the base of human resources from which industry and other sectors of economic activity draw their workers.

This increasing participation of women in the labor force, along with the decline of the extended family, translates into an increasing demand for services to care for children. In societies where women's participation in industry and services is increasing, the fundamental policy decision is whether care is provided by an informal system, with wide variations in quality, or by a planned system. The informal system is the result of the arrangements that working families make for the care of their children with older siblings, other family members, neighbors, babysitters, maids, preschools. The planned system is the result of public policy that sets standards to improve the quality of the care available.

Table 3. Percentage of the labor force who are women and number of women in the labor force, 1965 and 1988.

	1965		1988	
	Women as % of Workforce	Number of Women	Women as % of Workforce	Number of Women
Argentina	23	1,997,781	28	3,142,161
Barbados	41	36,364	47	62,851
Bolivia	21	270,520	25	544,912
Brazil	20	5,298,843	27	14,455,259
Chile	22	599,879	28	1,290,556
Colombia	20	1,100,030	22	2,183,845
Costa Rica	17	75,033	22	211,955
Cuba	17	421,871	31	1,339,533
Dominican Republic	10	107,702	15	298,447
Ecuador	16	266,891	19	599,227
El Salvador	19	181,897	25	508,508
Guatemala	13	177,860	16	394,228
Guyana	20	36,978	25	91,022
Haiti	47	1,035,380	42	1,265,908
Honduras	13	93,849	18	268,022
Jamaica	41	287,894	46	542,641
Mexico	16	2,068,651	27	7,777,981
Nicaragua	19	100,612	25	274,999
Panama	23	102,016	27	223,574
Paraguay	21	138,820	21	277,049
Peru	21	717,766	24	1,633,310
Suriname	24	21,618	29	37,428
Trinidad and Tobago	28	84,704	30	143,827
Uruguay	25	271,122	31	369,682
Venezuela	19	518,172	27	1,764,920
Total		16,012,253		39,701,845

Source: World Bank 1989.
Note: Countries for which no information is available do not appear in this table.

Efficiency of Primary Education

Although most children in the LAC region enroll in first grade (over 90 percent of eight- and nine-year-olds were enrolled in 1987 [UNESCO 1990, 474]), many never finish primary school. At the core of the paradox of high entrance rates and low completion rates are high repetition rates. Many children repeat a grade; repeating once increases the likelihood that children will repeat again and will eventually drop out of school. Repetition rates are highest at the earliest grades, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Declared repetition rates (percentages) by grade in the LAC region, 1987.

	GRADE								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Brazil	24	19	15	12	20	16	16	10	
Colombia	20	14	11	9	6	10	9	8	5
Ecuador	10	9	6	6	4	2			
Uruguay	17	10	8	6	6	3			
Peru	18	14	12	9	8	4	13	10	7
Costa Rica	18	12	10	8	6	2	12	9	8
El Salvador	17	8	6	5	3	2	1	1	0
Honduras	25	14	12	8	5	1			
Nicaragua	25	13	12	7	5	2			
Panama	19	16	11	9	6	3	17	11	8
Cuba	0	12	6	13	9	6	8	5	3
Mexico	18	11	9	8	5	1	1	3	2
Dominican Republic	26	16	13	11	10	9	8	6	
Aruba	13	9	9	9	9	2			
Dominica	5	3	3	3	2	4	17	2	1
Jamaica	7	2	1	1	2	7	1	1	2
Suriname	30	20	21	24	22	22			

Source: UNESCO-OREALC 1990.
Note: Countries for which no information is available do not appear in this table.

Ernesto Schiefelbein, a pioneer in analyzing the importance of this subject for the region, has convincingly argued that repetition is the major threat to internal efficiency of educational systems and a sign of low quality. His latest estimates of repetition for Latin America are 40 percent for first grade and 30 percent for primary schools overall, at a cost of almost $2 billion per year (Schiefelbein 1988).

Why would so many children fail a grade when they are just beginning school? The answer may lie in the amount of development that takes place before children enter school. Learning is a continuous process, and a child's initial learning experiences expand or limit opportunities for further learning. There is nothing magical about the age six or seven, when most children enter first grade; they have been ready to learn before.

There is a relationship between the percentage of children who have access to preschool education and the percentage of children who repeat in primary school. Table 5 shows that most of the countries with lower enrollment rates in preschool (eight out of twelve) have high repetition rates, while most of the countries with high enrollment rates in preschool (six out of nine) have low repetition rates.

Table 5. Countries with high and low repetition rates and high and low preschool enrollment rates in the LAC region.

		Repetition Rates	
		Low (Less than 9 percent)	High (More than 9 percent)
Preschool Enrollment Rates	High (More than 35 percent)	Guyana Venezuela Mexico Argentina Jamaica Cuba	Costa Rica Panama Suriname
	Low (Less than 35 percent)	Trinidad and Tobago El Salvador Ecuador Honduras	Paraguay Uruguay Nicaragua Dominican Republic Guatemala Peru Brazil Colombia

Notes: Countries have been categorized as below or above the median of the distribution of preschool enrollment rates and repetition rates. The values for those indicators are from Unesco 1991. Countries for which no information is available do not appear in this table.

Conclusions

The justification for national policies on early childhood education, therefore, has several bases. As more women enter the workforce, children need quality care and benefit most from a system that provides them with a foundation for primary education.

However, a new emphasis on preschool education should not distract policy makers from the changes necessary to improve the primary education system itself. Beyond the influence of children's preschool experiences on future learning, the work that schools do themselves to improve quality and efficiency is of critical importance.

Lessons from Early Childhood Education in the United States

There has been a long and rich debate regarding early childhood education in the United States. This debate has both fueled and been informed by research. There are useful lessons from this debate for early childhood education policy in Latin America.

A central point of the debate revolves around whether early childhood education should focus on providing custody for children or on stimulating their development. The increase of women's participation in the workforce and of one-parent families has expanded the need for services to take care of children. Recognizing that children's success in school is partly a result of their learning experiences by age five or six, educators have sought to find ways to enhance child development, particularly through compensatory efforts that give at-risk children increased opportunities to benefit from schooling.

More recent contributions to this debate suggest there need be no conflict between the custodial and the educational models:

> *Above all, the idea that early childhood programs should be either "developmental" or "custodial" will only limit such programs. After all, the schools are rich, multi-purpose institutions in which economic, political, moral, and avocational objectives coexist. At their best, early childhood programs are similarly rich and multifaceted, providing cognitive, physical, social and emotional development for children, the security of full-time child care for working parents, a cooperative understanding between parents and caregivers, and parent education for those who seek different ways of interacting with their children. The best programs provide children with early, noncompetitive, and nonthreatening experiences in an integrated setting with children of other racial and class backgrounds, rather than segregating "at-risk" children from others in special classes. To search for a single purpose for early childhood programs is to destroy this vision of what early childhood programs could be.* (Grubb 1987, 21-22)

Despite attempts to reconcile the need for programs that develop children to their fullest potential and for programs that serve the needs of working parents, the tension between these two objectives is present in attempts to design policy with limited resources. Should policy aim at high-quality programs for only some of the children who need preschool education, or should it compromise on quality to serve a greater number of children? This dilemma is key for LAC countries facing limited public resources for education.

Research in the United States has much to contribute to discussions of the importance of early childhood education, of the need for high-quality programs, and of the type of program that is most appropriate to promote children's development. While reviewing this research, however, the reader should keep in mind the limits in our ability to generalize for the population as a whole from experiences in which families participate voluntarily. We do not know if the observed benefits would hold if such programs were extended to families that differ in various ways (in motivation or education, for example) from the families that placed their children voluntarily in preschool programs. In a strict sense, the benefits observed in these programs are valid only for families with the characteristics of those participating in the programs studied, and generalization of results should be done on a tentative basis. On a more practical level, this is the available evidence.

In 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act inaugurated Head Start, one of the major efforts in the War on Poverty. The main purpose of this project was to prevent educational failure for at-risk children. Only children below certain income levels are eligible; "however, there is a practice of including 10 percent of youngsters who are above the income requirements and 10 percent who are handicapped, without regard to family income" (Weikart 1989, 24). Since 1965, Head Start has served 10.9 million children, although only about 24 percent of the three- to four-year-olds who live in poverty have participated (Shanker 1987, 52). Nonetheless, Head Start has been expanding continuously, partly as a result of the stream of evidence documenting the positive effects of this program.

Another valuable source of information on the effects of early childhood education are the longitudinal studies of the High/Scope Foundation's Perry Preschool Program. The High/Scope program began in 1962, implementing a Piagetian-influenced curriculum based on the theory that children are active learners and construct knowledge from activities they plan themselves. The program consisted of one or two years of half-day preschool during seven months of each year, and home visits for high-risk four- and five-year-olds (Kagan 1990, 29).

The studies summarized in Table 6 consistently show that preschool programs increase the intellectual ability of children when they enter school, reduce the percentage who need special education or who repeat a grade, and reduce the number of high school dropouts. The Perry Preschool longitudinal study followed the participating children throughout adolescence and beyond, finding that their preschool attendance increased literacy ability, the percentage who enroll in school beyond high school, and the percentage employed, and reduced the number of arrests and teenage pregnancies and the probability of requiring welfare.

Table 6. Documented effects of preschool programs for poor children.

Finding Study	Program Group	Control Group	Probability of Error
IQ Scores at School Entry			
Early Training	96	86	<.01
Perry Preschool	94	83	<.01
Harlem	96	91	<.01
Mother-Child Home	107	103	--
Special Education Placements			
Rome Head Start	11%	25%	<.05
Early Training	3%	29%	<.01
Perry Preschool	16%	28%	<.05
New York Kindergarten	2%	5%	<.01
Mother-Child Home	14%	39%	<.01
Retentions in Grade (Repetition)			
Rome Head Start	51%	63%	--
Early Training	53%	69%	--
Perry Preschool	35%	40%	--
Harlem	24%	45%	<.01
New York Kindergarten	16%	21%	<.05
Mother-Child Home	13%	19%	--
High School Dropouts			
Rome Head Start	50%	67%	<.05
Early Training	22%	43%	<.10
Perry Preschool	33%	51%	<.05
Additional Perry Preschool Findings			
Competence/literacy	61%	38%	<.05
Postsecondary enrollments	38%	21%	<.05
Arrests	31%	51%	<.05
Teenage pregnancies per 100 girls	64	117	<.10
19-year-olds employed	50%	32%	<.05
19-year-olds on welfare	18%	32%	<.05

Source: Weikart 1987, 171. (Adapted from Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, and Weikart, 1984.)
Note: All of the programs referred to in this table are child development programs for poor children.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Program was evaluated from an economic point of view. The cost savings in terms of special education, crime, and welfare assistance are six times as large as the costs of the program and the costs resulting from more students pursuing higher education.

The conclusions of the studies of preschool programs are well summarized in this statement:

> *Far fewer poor children who have attended good preschool programs need special education classes or have to repeat a grade. Their greater success in school tends to lead to greater success in adolescence and adulthood. Their rates of delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and welfare usage are lower, and their rates of high school completion and subsequent employment are higher.* (Weikart 1989, 4)

All of these evaluations, however, emphasize the importance of preschool programs having high quality in order to achieve such impact.

> *[T]he benefits of exemplary programs cannot be expected for ostensibly similar programs of low quality: it is senseless to cite evidence about the educational benefits of exemplary, high quality programs, and then to enact programs with low expenditures, low ratios, low salaries, and inadequate teacher preparation.* (Grubb 1987, 49)

Research on which type of preschool curriculum is most beneficial for children suggests the need to have:

> *1) A clear curriculum, with opportunities for children to initiate activities that would lead them to explore and learn. Child's play is essential; there should not be pressure for academic achievement.*
> *2) Low student/teacher ratios (10:1).*
> *3) Staff trained in early childhood education and care.*
> *4) Continued in-service training of staff, and supervision in the implementation of a developmentally-oriented curriculum.*
> *5) Evaluation that is not based on tests but that gives staff opportunities to see how the children respond to the environment.*
> *6) Active involvement of parents in the program and training for parents.*
> *7) Good administrative backup and access to support services in health and nutrition.*
> (Weikart 1989)

In the United States, the importance of providing early childhood education services is an issue that has received much attention from the public and private sectors. The Committee for Economic Development has addressed several policy papers to the need for early childhood education services, calling for an increased role for government and businesses in meeting this need (Committee for Economic Development 1991).

It is appropriate to conclude this section on the lessons from U.S. research with a comment by Halpern on this subject:

> *A variety of factors limit the generalizability of the U.S. evidence to Latin America. The debilitating health and developmental effects of poverty on young children in Latin America are more powerful and pervasive than the effects of poverty on young children in the United States.... Poor children and their families in Latin America do not have access to the variety of medical, social, and income-support programs that buffer the effects of poverty for families in the United States. In other words, the preventive and compensatory work that an early childhood intervention program has to undertake in most Latin American countries is greater than that of a similar program in the United States.* (Halpern 1986, 204)

Poverty in Latin America is a widespread and growing phenomenon. There are no "safety nets" or services comparable to those in the United States or other industrialized countries. Consequently, while the needs are greater, the challenges are greater too. There is no doubt that by the time children reach primary school, the effects of social disadvantage present schools with a serious challenge in terms of providing equality of educational opportunity. To this end, interventions that reach children before they enter school are justified. To promote true opportunity for the poor, preschool programs in the LAC region may have to do much more than comparable programs in countries where families have access to other social services.

Lessons from Early Childhood Education in Latin America and the Caribbean

Most of the countries in the LAC region have experience in the field of early childhood education; however, this interest is relatively new. Early childhood education was rarely a domain for public initiative prior to 1970 (Myers 1983, 127).

There have been a number of studies on the effects of preschool education, though most look at short-term cognitive effects and do not include information on costs. In the LAC region, there is nothing comparable to the type of cost-benefit analysis of long-term effects presented in the longitudinal studies of the High/Scope Perry Preschool program. The existing studies, however, consistently point to the positive effects of preschool in promoting student achievement and in preventing school failure in the early grades. In examining this evidence, the reader should be mindful of the possible bias in these results resulting from the fact that programs in which people participate voluntarily may have different effects if extended to populations with different characteristics.

Effects of Programs With Nutrition Component

> *There is considerable evidence that the physical, cognitive, and social characteristics that a child brings to the schooling experience are important determinants of the success of that experience. This child's characteristics are the sum of many influences. But for children in Latin America they are shaped most powerfully by the consequences of poverty in early childhood—malnutrition, morbidity, and parental care giving focused on survival. It has been estimated that 40 percent of the 85 million children under 6 years of age in Latin America suffer from chronic protein-energy malnutrition, and 10 percent from severe, acute malnutrition. Both forms of malnutrition impair children's physical growth and cognitive and social development in ways relevant to the adjustment to school demands.* (Halpern 1986, 194-195)

Two studies from Colombia document the positive consequences of nutritional supplementation, health care, and early stimulation in cognitive development. The Cali study assigned 333 children to one of various treatment conditions, consisting of participation from one to four years in a center-based preschool program with nutritional supplementation, health care, and education. All treated groups showed gains in IQ scores. The researchers were able to follow 274 of the children until age ten and found that those treated were more likely to have been promoted to the next grade each year (McKay & McKay 1983).

The Bogotá study assigned 443 families from slums in Santa Fe de Bogotá to one of several treatment conditions involving nutritional supplementation for various lengths of time from pregnancy to age three, and training for mothers on early stimulation in home visits by para-professionals. Food supplements and tutoring had significant effects on the cognitive abilities of the children; tutoring of mothers had more impact when accompanied by food supplements. Children whose mothers were trained enrolled earlier in primary school and were less likely to repeat (Halpern 1986, 208).

Effects of Preschool Education on Academic Achievement

Research has shown that, with few exceptions, preschool attendance increases children's chances of success in primary school and reduces the likelihood of repetition and dropping out. The results of several studies are summarized below.

A study in Chile examined the differences in academic achievement at the beginning and end of the first grade between a sample of 436 students who had and 126 who had not attended preschool. The study found that although the preschool experience did not eliminate the differences in achievement between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, the effects of preschool on reading ability were higher for children from poorer homes at the beginning of first grade. This difference remained only for students from the middle-low income level. There were, however, no differences in the grades assigned by the teachers to students who had attended preschool and those who had not (Filp et al. 1983).

Studies in Argentina and Colombia compared student achievement at the end of first grade between a sample of students who had and students who had not attended preschool (Pozner 1983; Rozo et al. 1981). The study in Argentina compared 104 children who had attended preschool with 48 who had not. The scores in a reading and writing test were higher for those who had attended preschool; among those who attended preschool, 67 percent achieved very good scores, while only 31 percent of those who did not attend preschool achieved such scores (Pozner 1983, 77). In addition, proportionately more children passed the first grade among those who received a preschool education than among those who did not. In urban areas, 85 percent of the children who had attended preschool passed, compared to only 63 percent of those who did not. For the same groups, failure rates were 9 percent and 26 percent, respectively, and dropout rates were 4 percent and 10 percent, respectively. Similar trends were observed in rural areas: Among those who attended preschool, 70 percent passed the first grade, 25 percent failed, and 5 percent dropped out; among those who did not attend preschool, 43 percent passed, 23 percent failed, and 27 percent dropped out (Pozner 1983, 78).

A similar study in Bolivia, however, found no differences between students who had attended and those who had not attended preschool as measured by their level of achievement in basic skills and math in first grade (Subirats et al. 1981).

In Brazil, a study examined the impact of preschool on reading and math ability with follow-up until the end of the first grade. The findings suggest that preschool increases reading ability and school readiness. Fifty-six students who had attended preschool were compared with fifty-three who had not and with fourteen who received a short training course to prepare them for school. While 64 percent of the students who attended preschool were promoted at the end of first grade, only 34 percent of those who did not attend preschool were promoted. Fifty percent of the students who received the short training were promoted.

A recent study examining the effects of preschool education in a sample of 11,442 students in Thailand[1] concluded that access to preschool education had a significant, though modest, effect on achievement in mathematics and Thai language three years later (in third grade). The effects of preschool attendance were more pronounced in urban areas than in rural areas. There was no difference in gains from preschool for math achievement for students of different socioeconomic backgrounds, but for language achievement the effect of preschool was higher for students from a higher socioeconomic background. The authors of this study point out that in Thailand, preschools attended by children in urban areas and by children of higher socioeconomic backgrounds are of higher quality (Raudenbush et al. 1991, 265).

[1] I have included this study from a country outside the LAC region because the analysis is based on a sophisticated multilevel methodology that allows the researcher to control for the effect of socioeconomic background.

A study examining the factors that contribute to primary grade repetition in rural schools in Honduras found that repeaters were less likely to have had some form of preschool experience than students who were promoted to the next grade. Fifty percent of those who were promoted from the first grade had had preschool experience,[2] while only 40 percent of those who repeated had had that experience. This difference compounds as the students progress from one year to the next; by the time they reach grade three, 48 percent of those promoted had had preschool experience, while only 30 percent of those who repeated had had such experience (McGinn et al. 1992, 8).

In considering the results of these evaluations, however, the following comment is relevant:

> *During this workshop we should be alert to the built-in bias it has toward viewing preschool interventions as investments and toward emphasis on individual child development with relatively little regard for effects on the family or on the community. The bias leads us naturally to focus on reductions in "wastage" in primary schools associated with the extension of preschool education. But in doing so, will we miss more important effects? It may be that the type of preschool program most likely to cut down repetition and wastage is one in which children have been taught to be more docile, to adjust better to authoritarian teachers, and to accept an irrelevant curriculum presented in unimaginative ways. Will an investment bias lead us to seek out the ways children with early education adjust better to primary school when the reverse should be done? Will an emphasis on individual development and subsequent performance in schools lead us to overlook important effects of early programs on the family and the community that, in the longer term, may be more important for bringing about changes—in the primary school as well as in other areas of life?* (Myers 1983, 130)

The preschool programs in Latin America that have been evaluated do have positive effects in promoting student achievement and preventing school failure; however, evaluations are very limited. They do not include information on costs, and their design and methodologies do not allow an appropriate analysis of program effects for children from different social backgrounds. Carrying out sound evaluations of the many existing programs in Latin America should be a priority for the countries of the region and for donors. Existing evidence supports the argument that preschool education works in Latin America, but determining what works, for whom, in what contexts, and at what cost will require more research and evaluation.

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[2] Including as one form of preschool experience attending school as listener ("oyente") the year prior to enrolling formally in first grade.

Options for Developing Early Childhood Education in the LAC Region

If providing early childhood education is ultimately a desirable goal, each country in the LAC region will have to determine the best way to design and implement relevant policies. The first question to be resolved is whether the country should give priority to planning preschool programs at all and then what policies it should adopt to foster the development of appropriate early childhood education programs. The perspective adopted in this paper is that early childhood education should become a priority only once a country has provided most children with *access* to primary education.

National Potential for Developing Early Childhood Education Programs

Most countries in the LAC region have the *capacity* to enroll all the primary-school-age population in the existing schools. Table 7 presents gross enrollment ratios (an indicator of *capacity*) and net enrollment ratios (an indicator of *access*). Gross enrollment ratio is the total number of children enrolled in the basic level over the total number of children of the official ages at this level (typically seven to twelve for countries where the cycle is six years). Since many children repeat and are older than the upper limit of the "official" age, this figure is often more than 100 percent and overestimates actual enrollment rates of the particular age group. Net enrollment ratio, which is the ratio of only those children of the "official" age group for primary school over the total number of children in that age group, is a better estimate of access to that level. Table 8 presents the relationship between capacity and access in primary education.

In 1988, gross enrollment ratios exceeded 100 percent in 80 percent of the countries of the region. Only six countries had gross enrollment ratios below 100 percent (but these were still above 74 percent). In 1988, most countries enrolled 90 percent or more of the children of primary school age in school (net enrollment). The five countries enrolling less than 80 percent of the primary-school-age children were Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, and Nicaragua (although we do not have figures for 1988 in Guatemala, 58 percent enrollment in 1980 suggests that this country, too, is in the low end of access).

All six countries that do not have capacity to enroll all primary-school-age children within the existing system (those with gross enrollment ratios below 100 percent) also have low net enrollment ratios (less than 90 percent). This suggests that these countries should focus first on solving access constraints to ensure that there is a space for every child in primary school before turning their attention to preschool education.

Table 7. Basic education in LAC countries. Duration of the basic cycle and of the compulsory cycle; gross and net enrollment ratios, 1980 and 1988.

	Duration		Gross Enrollment		Net Enrollment	
Country	Basic	Compulsory	1980	1988	1980	1988
Haiti	6	6	74	83	36	44
El Salvador	9	9	75	80	58	72
Colombia	5	5	128	114	78	73
Nicaragua	6	6	99	99	74	76
Bolivia	8	8	84	91	77	83
Brazil	8	8	99	104	81	84
Costa Rica	9	6	105	100	89	85
Trinidad and Tobago	6	7	97	100	88	87
Venezuela	10	6	109	106	86	89
Chile	8	8	109	102	90	90
Panama	6	6	106	106	88	90
Paraguay	6	6	104	104	87	90
Honduras	6	6	93	106	74	91
Uruguay	6	6	106	109	n.a.	91
Cuba	6	6	108	104	98	96
Suriname	6	6	125	125	n.a.	96
Jamaica	6	6	101	103	94	97
Peru	6	6	114	122	86	97
Mexico	6	6	115	117	n.a.	99
Argentina	7	7	106	111	n.a.	n.a.
Barbados	11	6	100	n.a.	97	n.a.
Dominican Republic	8	8	118	101	n.a.	n.a.
Ecuador	6	6	113	117	84	n.a.
Guatemala	6	6	71	74	58	n.a.
Guyana	6	6	100	79	90	n.a.

Source: Unesco 1991.
Note: Countries for which no information is available do not appear in this table.

Table 8. Countries with high and low gross and net enrollment ratios in the LAC region.

		Gross Enrollment Ratios	
		Less than 100 percent	More than 100 percent
Net Enrollment Ratios	90 percent access or more		Chile Panama Paraguay Honduras Uruguay Cuba Suriname Jamaica Peru Mexico
	Less than 90 percent access	Haiti El Salvador Nicaragua Bolivia Guatemala Guyana	Colombia Brazil Costa Rica Trinidad Venezuela

NOTE: Countries for which no information is available do not appear in this table.

At the other extreme are ten countries with sufficient capacity to enroll all primary-school-age children (gross enrollment ratios more than 100 percent) and with most of the children of primary school age enrolled in school (net enrollment ratios more than 90 percent). These are the countries that could more easily expand preschool services using existing resources, especially as declines in population growth free up space and teachers currently working in the primary grades.

The situation for the five countries with over 100 percent gross enrollment ratios but less than 90 percent net enrollment ratios is the most complex. Estimating whether expanding preschool education would result in tradeoffs in access or quality in primary school would require an understanding of the reasons for the lower access. If the 10 percent of the primary-school-age children not in school are not enrolled because no schools are located near their residences, then making those facilities available should have priority over expanding preschool facilities, which, in the initial stages, would probably benefit children from more favored social backgrounds.

National Policy Options

As countries of the region embark on designing early childhood education policies, resource constraints will play a dominant role in determining what is feasible. Clearly, expansion of preschool education should not result in declines in the quantity or quality of primary education. On the contrary, the expansion of preschool education should go hand in hand with reforms in traditional primary curricula to make them more developmentally appropriate and to incorporate the development of social skills along with cognitive abilities.

Countries close to universal enrollment in primary education might be able to develop preschools attached to primary schools by reallocating primary school teachers. Thailand has done this effectively to address two problems: the need for preschool attention and an excess of primary school teachers as birth rates have declined. Similarly, Costa Rica, another country with relatively high net enrollment ratios, has expanded preschool spaces through "recargo de funciones" for primary school teachers.

A major issue will be finding the resources to fund the establishment of high-quality preschool programs. Initiatives that mobilize private sector involvement—including communities, industry and business, trade unions, and religious and other voluntary organizations—are particularly needed. New systems of child care should not attempt to replace the family or the community, but to strengthen them. The Servol preschool program in Trinidad and Tobago is a good example of a program that builds on community participation (see Box 1).

Initiatives to train all members of the community, including older siblings, in strategies to promote the health and cognitive, social, and emotional development of young children are also important. Such efforts will optimize the quality of the informal system of care currently in place. Courses on child development should be incorporated in secondary curricula and nonformal education programs using radio, television, and other dissemination channels. Existing programs of custodial care could be strengthened by incorporating elements of a developmentally appropriate curriculum. The government could promote new partnerships to address this problem by developing models, incentives, and guidance for industry to establish child development centers near work sites.

Given resource constraints that prevent public financing of universal early childhood education, an appropriate role for the government would be to develop and disseminate sound models that the private sector (including communities, industry, or unions) could implement, and to induce demand for high-quality services (for instance, through educating the broader community about developmentally appropriate curricula for young children). The government could survey programs now developed by NGOs, identify the most effective, and support and disseminate them. The partnerships developed between several governments in Latin America and the NGOs working for Fe y Alegría schools illustrate the role governments can play in promoting high-quality preschool education for disadvantaged children (see Box 2).

BOX 1
The Critical Contribution of Communities and NGOs:
The Servol Program in Trinidad and Tobago

The Servol program in Trinidad and Tobago illustrates the important contribution that communities and non-governmental organizations can make to providing quality early childhood education. Servol was established in the 1970s by Father Gerard Pantin, who proposed a "philosophy of ignorance" approach to development work. This implies that an organization committed to serve the disadvantaged should not presuppose to know what their needs are, but should ask the community directly. Consequently, an important aspect of the philosophy of Servol is to respect the identity of the communities where it works, to listen rather than to impose methods or values. A prime goal of the program is to promote self-esteem and confidence among community members.

For many years Servol had experience running centers for school dropouts and preschoolers. In 1987, the newly appointed Minister of Education asked Servol to administer all fifty preschools formerly under the authority of the Ministry. In 1991 Servol ran 154 preschool centers for approximately 4,500 children. Servol trains teachers, prepares curricula, supervises classes, and provides furniture and equipment. The government contributes the basic salary of teachers in the preschool centers (about 40 percent of the salary of a primary school teacher). The communities provide the space, an administrative council, and the resources to complete teacher salaries.

In addition, Servol preschool centers have the following characteristics:

- Servol has developed a child-centered curriculum called S.P.I.C.E.S (Spiritual, Physical, Intellectual, Cultural, Emotional and Social), representing its major emphases.
- Parents understand and accept the child-centered approach used by Servol, which contrasts with a traditional academic approach.
- Parent-teacher associations exist at each center, and parents participate in school activities.

To initiate activities, community representatives approach Servol to request the establishment of a preschool center. A Servol representative then explains the program and the responsibilities of the community. The community representatives discuss the proposal with other community members and identify an administrative council. The program is started only when there is sufficient support in the community. Servol provides assistance to the community in preparing the statutes of the association, electing representatives, identifying likely candidates to be trained as teachers, and determining suitable locations for the center.

The community's administrative council selects a young woman who has completed at least three years of secondary education to be trained as a teacher by Servol, and finances her studies. High-quality teacher training is a crucial component of the Servol program. Servol's teacher training program is a one-year, full-time program in the Servol Caribbean Teacher Training Center, followed by two years of practice. Teachers are trained to be community developers, following five key principles: teachers should listen to the children, their parents, and the community; they should practice respectful intervention; they should avoid cultural arrogance; the education should be child-centered; and participation of parents and the community should be encouraged.

Source: Mahabir 1992.

BOX 2

NGO-Government Collaboration to Provide Preschool Education: The Fe y Alegría Schools

In 1955 José María Vélaz, a Jesuit priest, opened a school for poor children in the house of a construction worker in Caracas. His main objective was to provide quality education to poor children. This concept soon grew into a group of schools that formed the organization *Fe y Alegría* (Faith and Joy). The organization has since expanded to eleven countries in Latin America and includes 463 schools and 15,214 teachers (of which 94 percent are lay). Fe y Alegría works at all levels of the formal education system and has nonformal education activities as well.

Because the Fe y Alegría schools mobilize contributions from the community, and draw on their international network and experience for continuous training of teachers, governments generally find them an attractive option for expanding educational opportunities to the disadvantaged. Teacher salaries are typically paid by the ministry of education, while Fe y Alegría provides teacher training, manages the schools, and raises funds from the local and international communities to finance teaching materials and projects.

In 1991 there were 15,643 children in childcare centers and 27,236 children in preschools run by Fe y Alegría in Latin America, as shown in the table below.

The philosophy of Fe y Alegría calls for integrating educational programs between different levels, and for integrating the school with the community. Consequently, some programs at levels other than preschool also contribute to improving the quality of care for young children. For example, in 1984 Bolivia started a program called *Programa Padres e Hijos* (Program for Parents and Children). This program was implemented for parents of children in Fe y Alegría schools and consists of a series of workshops to address problems that influence the quality of family life such as communication, family relations, alcoholism and drug addiction, and the media. The main objective of the program is to strengthen the contribution of parents to the functioning of the family (Fe y Alegría, 1988). In 1991, this program was functioning in three Departments in Bolivia with 27 groups of 945 parents reaching approximately 3,780 children.

Number of children served by the Fe y Alegría schools in 1991 in Latin America

	Hogar Infantil	Pre-Primaria
Bolivia	120	7,606
Brazil	6,384	6,679
Colombia	9,009	1,514
Ecuador	0	1,939
El Salvador	130	89
Guatemala	0	1,160
Nicaragua	0	1,048
Peru	0	144
Venezuela	0	7,057
Total	15,643	27,236

Source: Fe y Alegría Internacional 1991.

Conclusion

The need for national policy on early childhood education in Latin America and the Caribbean is the result of several factors. The increasing number of women entering the workforce is creating a pressing demand for childcare services. While most families take advantage of traditional arrangements—leaving their children with other family members, babysitters, or childcare centers—studies have shown that these informal custodians do not adequately prepare children for primary school education.

Research conducted in the United States, the LAC region, and other countries indicates that quality preschool programs can benefit children in a number of ways, particularly in developing countries. By monitoring children and by training their parents, these programs can have a marked effect on controlling nutrition-related problems that often affect school performance. By helping children to develop their cognitive skills—laying a foundation for reading, math, and other basic skills—a high-quality preschool program can improve students' chances of succeeding in primary school. Finally, by realizing that children are capable of learning at a very early age, preschools can inculcate intellectual curiosity and the desire to learn, thus encouraging children to continue their education through primary and perhaps through secondary school.

The key constraint to establishing successful preschool programs is financial. Governments in the LAC region that are not able to fund such programs must explore alternative sources of financing and provision. An appropriate role for the government would be to develop or identify and disseminate sound models that the private sector (including communities, industry, or unions) could implement, and to induce shifts in demands for high-quality services (for instance, through programs to educate the broader community on what constitutes a developmentally appropriate curriculum). Governments might also develop partnerships with NGOs and communities to provide quality care for poor children.

The great diversity in existing models of preschool and child care, and of organizational and funding mechanisms, suggests that there is plenty of material for sound evaluation and analysis to identify the most cost-effective options. At a minimum, the government must monitor the quality of the services provided and carry out evaluation and policy studies to improve service provision. Of special importance in these evaluations is to determine the extent to which the observed benefits of childcare programs interact with various characteristics of families (e.g., motivation, education) and to specify the ways in which families who seek to participate in these programs differ from those who do not.

The need for national policy on early childhood education stems from the recognition of new and growing needs of children and their families. Such policy can be informed by the experience that already exists in the region and in other countries. The alternative is to have a policy by default: the informal system that now cares for children and that is at the root of the perpetuation of school failure and poverty for many.

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